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The Drowning of Time: Ecological Catastrophe, Dialectics, and Allegorical Realism in João Paulo Borges Coelho's *Ponta Gea* and *Água: Uma novela rural*

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João Paulo Borges Coelho's latest novel, Ponta Gea (2017), is an intense process of working through memory that starts by positing memory itself as water. Água: Uma novela rural (Water: A Rural Tale) (2016) is a prolonged reflection on the contradictions of Mozambican society as it undergoes rapid and drastic changes related both to modernity and to climate change. The two texts draw on some of the author's established preoccupations, themes and images, focused on the crucial function of water. Not only in terms of their content, but also due to their formal experimentations, the novels constitute daring interventions in Mozambican and Lusophone literature. The present essay discusses the novels in terms of their engagement with ecological issues, dialectics, memory, and technology. At the same time it also analyses the novels' formal aspects, from the question of –(magical) realism to the various processes of allegorizing deployed.

Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language.

Raymond Williams, *Keywords*

At the beginning of his seminal study on *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon posits an important distinction between a more traditional concept of violence as something of great immediacy and spectacular effect and what he considers, rightly, as even more devastating, the systematic and systemic violence that, because of its being slow and unspectacular, often is rendered invisible. He goes on to note:

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that

star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?¹

João Paulo Borges Coelho's recent novels, *Água: uma novela rural* (2016) and *Ponta Gea* (2017), both engage specifically with environmental questions, as spectacular as sudden, massive flooding but also the quieter, slower ones, of continuous life threatening drought.² Water, as already in other of his works plays a key role, as does the complex relation of humans to other forms of being. If *Água* appears to be most explicitly concerned with climate change and its catastrophic consequences, *Ponta Gea*, even though very differently, is an equally thorough reflection on human relations, both among ourselves and with regard to the 'natural' world. At the same time, both novels also refuse any simple dichotomies be it between humans and nature, technology and culture on the one hand, and nature on the other, past and present, country and city, memory and History, tradition and modernity. Instead what informs these novels is the setting up of such binaries in a complex dialectic relationship, which, even if never resolved, still precludes us from ever coming to accept the antinomies as such, and much less as irreducible. Both novels are very much focused with specific aspects of life in Mozambique yet they also escape any regionalism. In *Água* this is accomplished to a great extent through an avoidance of any specifically named places and by the extensive allegorizing that constitutes one of the novel's principal formal elements. *Ponta Gea*, conversely, as its title already demonstrates, focuses almost exclusively on one very specific place, the area in Beira, Mozambique, where the narrator – and the author – grew up. Yet, it too avoids any reductive identification functioning much more as a meditation on the significance of place, rather than merely as a kind of nostalgic memoir. Both novels are at the forefront of eco-fiction writing in Portuguese not just because of the way they draw attention to the seriousness of the current climate problems, but because they refuse to isolate human beings from the very eco-system they so carelessly threaten to destroy forever.

¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

² João Paulo Borges Coelho, *Água: uma novela rural* (Lisboa: Caminho, 2016). João Paulo Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea* (Lisboa: Caminho, 2017).

Although critical studies of João Paulo Borges Coelho's narratives already had noticed the importance of bodies of water, more recent ones have focused specifically on the representation of water and its implications from an eco-critical perspective.³ Thus, Ana Margarida Fonseca in 'Das Águas e das Gentes: Escrever a Identidade' calls attention not only to the importance of water metaphors throughout the author's oeuvre, but very specifically focuses on *Água*, which she analyses in terms of how the image of the river becomes crucial in order to sketch notions of identity. Fonseca, who had previously also written on the imagery of water in two other novels of the author⁴, in this essay attempts specifically to probe into a range of oppositions that structure the novel and which Fonseca, although loosely, wants to see as forming a dialectical process.⁵ One of those that I find crucial and will want to reflect on further concerns the split between country and city as well as the confrontation between tradition and modernity. As suggestive as Fonseca's essay is, it still subscribes to a conventional notion of modernity that sees it primarily allied to development (a certain kind of development) and the idea of a, more often than not, teleological view of progress. Another recent essay that also looks at *Água* and questions having to do with modernity and tradition is Isabel Ferreira Gould's *Modernidade, Diálogo e Pacto em Água: uma novela rural* (2017).⁶ Indeed, one can see how both critics were attracted by many similar issues raised by the novel and also how, both, in spite of their differences, come up with similar answers because based on a view of modernity which fails to engage with the fundamental issue of capitalism and its grip on the world. This is not to say that either critic ignores questions that are intrinsically related to neo-colonial capitalist exploitation. One can see an awareness of such problematics in the background, so to speak, as, for instance, when Ferreira Gould comments on Borges Coelho's expressed views on the novel and what she refers to as the interaction of modernity and tradition in a context of precarity.⁶ It is just that there is no attempt at either directly relating the conditions of crisis to the effects of

³ Several of the essays in the present volume also focus on the predominant water imagery, especially of the sea, in the works of João Paulo Borges Coelho. Even though none of them takes up a specific ecological critique, nonetheless, they all focus on the political implications of such imagery.

⁴ Ana Margarida Fonseca, 'Líquidas fronteiras: representações dos rios em *As Duas Sombras do Rio e Campo de Trânsito*', in Sheila Khan, Sandra Sousa *et al.*, eds, *Visitas a João Paulo Borges Coelho. Leituras, diálogos e futuros* (Lisboa: Colibri, 2017), 89–104.

⁵ Ana Margarida Fonseca, 'Das Águas e das Gentes: Escrever a Identidade', *Mulemba* 10/18 (2018), 97–108.

⁶ Isabel A. Ferreira Gould, 'Modernidade, diálogo e pacto em *Água, uma novela rural*', in Sheila Khan, Sandra Sousa *et al.*, eds, *Visitas a João Paulo Borges Coelho. Leituras, diálogos e futuros* (Lisboa: Colibri, 2017), 215–228, 218.

capitalism, nor is there any systematic consideration of the problem as both critics tend to avoid laying bare the mechanisms involved, preferring instead to imagine supposed pacts with the reader to allow for an entry into Mozambique's rural world.

Another recent study of *Água*, Jessica Falconi's 'Leituras Ecocríticas de João Paulo Borges Coelho', moves away from traditional humanistic interpretations of the text to focus more directly on questions related to a problematization of the circumstances issuing from a postcolonial condition and expressed foremost as a reflection on a broken relation between human beings and nature.⁷ The advantage Falconi sees in pursuing such a line of enquiry has to do, as she notes, with the ability thus provided for analysing comparatively the various intersections between ecological and social concerns, political critique, history and a reflection on identity.⁸ Falconi's approach, more than that of the others, is centrally preoccupied with ecological issues and does refer specifically to a version of ecocriticism based on what has come to be designated as new materialisms, referring directly, among others, to the work by Jane Bennet in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* and the volume edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost on *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*.⁹ From Falconi's analysis I find especially relevant the attention she gives to the structuring of the novel around the constant dialogue between the two elder figures, Ryo [river] and Laama [mud], their questioning of nature and of the relationship between it and human beings, as well as further inquiries into the role of tradition, history and memory, on one hand, and science, technology and innovation, on the other. While drawing on these recent efforts, as well as on older, more extensive studies of the work of Borges Coelho, such as Nazir Can's *Discurso e Poder nos Romances de João Paulo Borges Coelho*¹⁰, at present I would like to suggest a different form of looking at how, in both *Água* and *Ponta Gea*, Borges Coelho goes further than simply continuing his previous use of symbolic references to

⁷ Jessica Falconi, 'Leituras ecocríticas de João Paulo Borges Coelho', *Mulemba* 10.18 (2018), 85–96.

⁸ This is clearly expressed towards the conclusion of the essay: 'uma leitura ecocrítica destes textos permite salientar também as relações entre preocupação "ecológica" e social, crítica política e reflexão histórica e identitária, sendo estas dimensões as múltiplas facetas das representações proporcionadas por JPBC. Emerge, assim, a complexidade dos problemas ecológicos, as mútuas imbricações entre dinâmicas sociais, políticas e ambientais, bem como o peso do passado colonial e, last but not least, as atuais assimetrias do contexto regional'. Falconi, 'Leituras ecocríticas de João Paulo Borges Coelho', 95.

⁹ Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Nazir Can, *Discurso e Poder nos Romances de João Paulo Borges Coelho* (Maputo: Alcance, 2014).

water or general ecological concerns to present us with a forceful critique of how ‘development’ has come to threaten not just established ways of life but life itself. In doing so, it will be my contention, Borges Coelho not only aligns national concerns with global ones but places the national and even individual cases as paradigmatic before the readers. In doing so, I will want to argue, Borges Coelho intervenes sharply on both the socio-political register and on the literary-aesthetic one. The two novels under consideration advance the notion of a Mozambican literature fully enmeshed in global currents and debates, participating fully in the world-literary system, without for a moment losing sight of their responsibility towards local specificities.

My own reading of the novels is informed, to a great extent, by the concept of World-Literature advocated by the Warwick Research Collective, defined ‘as the literature of the world-system – of the modern capitalist world-system, that is’.¹¹ Furthermore I also draw specifically on the work of two members of the WReC, Michael Niblett and Sharae Deckard, as well as on Fredric Jameson’s notion of a singular modernity and on Félix Guattari’s reflections in *The Three Ecologies*.¹² In contradistinction to Falconi’s reliance on New Materialism, the type of critique I am interested in remains fundamentally materialist.¹³ Niblett puts it rather succinctly at the outset of his essay, noting, as a follow up to his quoting a passage from the *Communist Manifesto* on the globalization of capital, that ‘the globalizing propensities of the capitalist world-system as outlined by Marx and Engels – in particular, its drive to appropriate raw materials from the “remotest zones” and its destruction of local and national self-sufficiency – implies a radical transformation of the global environment’.¹⁴ He also comments extensively on the notion of ‘critical

¹¹ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 8.

¹² Michael Niblett, ‘World-Economy, World-Ecology, World-Literature’, *Green Letters*, 16/1 (2012), 15–30; Sharae Deckard, ‘Water Shocks: Neoliberal hydrofiction and the crisis of “cheap” water’, *Atlantic Studies*, 16.1 (2019), 108–125; Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: The Athlone Press, 2000 [1989]).

¹³ The discussion on new and old materialism(s) is extensive and here I will refer only to one recent article, which, in my view, aptly exposes some of the contradictions inherent in the claims made by new materialism proponents and how, at least in my view, the claim for new materialisms in the end is little more than a rejection of a materialist critique that nonetheless would still want to bask in the intellectual status of what it denounces. See Alexander R. Galloway, ‘History Is What Hurts: On Old Materialism’, *Social Text* 34/2 (2016), 125–141.

¹⁴ Niblett, ‘World-Economy, World-Ecology, World-Literature’, 15.

irrealism' advanced by Michael Löwy¹⁵, as well as by the WReC, and to which I will return, as I find it important to understand the very form of Borges Coelho's novels.

Both novels constitute experiments in form that advance our understanding of contemporary narrative, while questioning, to the point of subverting, some cherished notions of periodization. Thus, one could very well make a claim that in both the extensive metanarrative features – the slippery slide between memory and History in *Ponta Gea*, or the seemingly fall back into an archaic, allegorizing mode in *Água* – make them prime candidates to be subsumed under the postmodern label, albeit a politically conscious and engaged version of it. But the moment one is tempted to do so, one also realizes that not only is such labelling futile, but that the novels, in a sense, also already preclude any such facile categorization. The preliminary note at the beginning of *Ponta Gea* ('Preâmbulo'), with its reflection on what infancy might be and how to conceptualize its relation to time (in itself both the inaugurating moment of the narrative and outside of it), could be referenced in this regard, even as it thoroughly mixes its various metaphors combining time, travel and the sea:

É, pois, sobre os escombros de possibilidades alternativas que se constroem estas pequenas narrativas. O risco em que a sua escrita incorre seria assim o de tornar irre recuperável tudo aquilo que não é convocado, ilhas perdidas na névoa do tempo, povoadas de fantasmas.¹⁶

[It is thus, then, over the ruins of alternative possibilities that these short narratives are constructed. The risk that its writing incurs would thus be of rendering irretrievable, all that is not conjured, islands lost in the fog of time, peopled with ghosts]

As this note also makes clear, although *Ponta Gea* – and *Água* too – is a very contemporary novel, it is also as much a novel about the past, or, more precisely, about the diverse flows of time and of the imbrication of the past in the future.

Rather than presenting us with a static time, or what would even be worst, with a nostalgic look at the past, the narratives of Borges Coelho insist on a dialectic relationship between different times. This is important in a number of ways: it both

¹⁵ Michael Löwy, 'The Current of Critical Irrealism: "A moonlit enchanted night"', in Matthew Beaumont, ed., *Adventures in Realism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 193–206.

¹⁶ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 11–12. All translations from both novels are mine, as the works have not yet appeared in English translation.

refutes conservative views on Africa and what African cultures and literatures might be, especially in reference to a western perspective still imposing itself as normative; and it asks us to understand modernity differently from the established idea of a western-centred technological advancement. In the novels the past, and even the archaic, does not merely survive alongside the present and the modern, but can be said to share alternating spaces, the blurring of which is essential to understand the mode of existence Borges Coelho's imagination registers for us. This same interconnectedness of different temporal forms can be seen at the base of Achile Mbembe's reflections:

I would argue that structures of temporality in colonial and postcolonial conditions are thoroughly entangled with the vicissitudes of the affective; with the subjective play of desire and uncertainty, fear and terror, trauma and unpredictability. In such contexts, we can only refer to the abstraction of time as a rhetorical figure. For many people caught in the vortex of colonialism and what comes after, the main indexes of time are the contingent, the ephemeral, the fugitive and the fortuitous — radical uncertainty and social volatility.¹⁷

Borges Coelho has also stated that beyond the focus on the simultaneity of different times, what is at stake for him is a direct confrontation with the negation of the past, the tendency to obliterate great parts of the colonial past of Mozambique and their substitution by a blank slate or a single version of a cleaned up past in which the narrative of liberation displaces all others. In a conversation with Elena Brugioni, for instance, he directly states that,

No que diz respeito ao processo histórico moçambicano, por vezes é como se esta transição não existisse: há um apagamento – um problema de memória. Um apagamento e, ao mesmo tempo, uma demonização do tempo colonial. Como se a independência de Moçambique fosse uma folha branca onde pudéssemos começar a escrever tudo de novo.¹⁸

¹⁷ 'Achile Mbembe in conversation with Isabel Hofmeyr', *South African Historical Journal* 56.1 (2000), 177–187, 182.

¹⁸ Elena Brugioni, 'A literatura e o léxico da pós-colonialidade: uma conversa com João Paulo Borges Coelho', *Diacrítica* 3/24 (2010), 428.

[Concerning Mozambique's historical process, sometimes it is as if this transition would not exist: there is an erasure – a problem of memory. An erasure and, at the same time, a demonization of colonial time. As if Mozambique's independence would be a blank page where we could start writing everything from the beginning]

Neither in *Água* nor in *Ponta Gea* do we see any direct way of confronting that kind of amnesia specifically, yet it should be noted that history suffuses the narratives beyond the merely episodic. Thus, in *Ponta Gea*, the reader is continuously exposed to the eruption of that submerged past, be it in the form of figures that recall how connected Mozambique always had been with India – and how a segment of its population with Indian roots was affected by events occurring in the subcontinent after Partition, or even because of the Portuguese government's reactions to India's reclaiming of the few Portuguese enclaves in 1961 – be it through various characters such as the impoverished and starving 'Zerofor', or Dimitri Tsafendas, a Greek-Mozambican who killed Hendrik Verwoerd, South Africa's Prime Minister, in 1966. In a similar way, even though following a different strategy, *Água* asks readers to understand the diegetic time of severe drought as one that cannot be understood without reference to the past when water was abundant, even if, as it seems – at least until the catastrophic flooding towards the end – all that is left are personal memories. The imbrication of different times in *Água*, other than in *Ponta Gea* then, does not take recourse on historical dates or events, but rather on a direct and sustained dialectic between different cognitive approaches to the world and reality be they fundamentally urban or rural, foreign or local, ancient or modern. The dialogue between the two elders, Ryo and Laama, is perhaps the clearest expression of such dialectic, but it is always augmented by the interaction between all the other characters among themselves as well, and that between human beings and the rest of nature, be it expressed in a faith on some magical procedure or other, or on more pragmatic, if equally illusory, forms of control.

The focus on water is common to both novels and, even though it also registers at the symbolic level, the actual, material presence (or absence) of water is far more acute. It would be a mistake to think that *Água* would be, much more than *Ponta Gea*, the one novel where an ecocritical perspective is strongest. For sure, in the earlier novel both the initial drought as well as the final flooding are catastrophic and as such could be said to outdo the references in the latter novel. And yet, in *Ponta Gea* not

only is water everywhere, it inaugurates the narrative: ‘É a primeira e mais persistente lembrança: a água como substância da cidade [It is the first and most persistent memory: water as the substance of the city].¹⁹ Moreover, that first chapter, aptly titled ‘Cidade Líquida’ [Liquid City] not only serves to reflect on the omnipresence of water, on water as the very foundation and ontology of the city, it also moves further beyond the opposition between urban and rural space. Indeed, even between solid and liquid space, as the rain and the sea cause massive flooding on the coast and a dissolution of all kinds of borders, spatial as well as temporal:

Hoje é como se desde sempre aquele espaço tivesse sido uma ruína. Não houve noite, não houve ontem, não houve mar, desde sempre só esta ruína filha do tempo. (...) Hoje, se por qualquer motivo nos calhasse lá voltar, veríamos com estupor nem sequer haver lugar, ser tudo mar.²⁰

[Today it is as if that space had always been a ruin. There was no night, there was no yesterday, there was no sea, always already this ruin a daughter of time. (...) Today, if by any chance we would return, we would see with surprise that there was not even a place, that the sea was all,]

The two novels still diverge in some important ways: *Ponta Gea* is narrated from a personal and individual perspective, so that even when referring to collective experiences, its tone is much closer to that of a memoir, whereas in *Água* the narrative perspective shifts among the characters even if only through the filter of the omniscient narrator. Also, even though water in *Ponta Gea* can also assume catastrophic proportions, it is represented as the one defining element of life, be it in an urban or a rural context. And it is inextricably linked with memory and, through it, with identity. In some cases it can be said to constitute a form of violent memory itself as when the narrator mentions a sudden torrential downpour that had followed upon a day of excessive heat and which makes him as a young boy get out of his room to fetch some water to drink and allows him to overhear the adults talking about ‘Zerofor’, a sort of mythical would-be assassin.²¹ In *Água*, though, water is from the very beginning viewed as something sinister and to be feared:

¹⁹ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 11.

²⁰ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 19–21.

²¹ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 95.

Um conselho: nunca confiem na água. (...) a água tem o horror do vazio, o afã de esbater diferenças (...). De nada nos vale medir a hidra: onde estará a cabeça da água, aquela que urde o perverso plano?²²

[One advice: never trust water. (...) water abhors the void, it strives to blur differences (...) There is no point in measuring the hydra: where could be the head of water, the one who plots the perverse plan?]

Only at the novel's conclusion will the full impact of such suspicions become clear as when the catastrophic flooding is described as if it were indeed a colossal many-headed snake. It is as if in *Água* Borges Coelho had himself unleashed a strong rage directed towards the implacable violence that nature can visit on human beings and how easily it can destroy all their wanton dreams of conquest. But of course, what Borges Coelho denounces in that novel is not the destructive force assumed by nature but rather the inability of many human beings to grasp that they too are part of nature. *Ponta Gea*, conversely, seems to redress such blindness, by constantly weaving through the various times and the various narratives, and reaffirming the power of memory, the persistence of ghosts, and the slow but sure victory of water: 'É a água que triunfa. As coisas duras da cidade – as árvores e as ruas, as casas e as pessoas – afundam lentamente neste nosso líquido amniótico e ganham a consistência do coral.' [It is the water that triumphs. The hard city things – the trees and the streets, the houses and people – drown slowly in this, our amniotic fluid and gain the consistency of coral].²³

By focusing on rural space and rural communities in *Água* what becomes more readily visible is how climate change is tied in with exploitation. Even if Borges Coelho ends up by dissolving any neat dichotomies between urban and rural – in a sense, all is, or returns to, the rural, and the city, unlike in *Ponta Gea*, remains an abstraction – throughout the novel there is a clear correlation between the exploitation of nature and what is happening. The foreign engineer, Waaser, comes to represent those forces that would seek to take advantage of nature, including the native population, as he is represented as a neocolonial incarnation of a belief in technology that fails, at a basic level, to understand the systemic nature of the forces at play:

²² Borges Coelho, *Água*, 9.

²³ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 30.

‘Para o Engenheiro Waaser o mundo será perfeito quando os caminhos dos rios forem todos rectos como as fronteiras de África.’ [For Waaser, the engineer, the world will be perfect when all of the river beds will be as straight as the national borders in Africa].²⁴ Borges Coelho never comes out directly with a pointed finger at this or that element. With Waaser this is especially clear. Not only does he personify water, already even in his name (from the German ‘Wasser’), but specifically by thinking he has mastery over it, that he can control its flows through the pipes he builds or administers it, from the tank trucks, when he pleases – and to whom he pleases, as he tries to seduce Maara.

As Borges Coelho has stated to Elena Brugioni, he refuses to see his role as a writer as somehow preaching to, or educating readers²⁵, so it should not surprise us that *Água* eschews any more direct forms of confronting capitalist exploitation of nature and the resulting ecological disasters. Opting rather for an allegorical presentation, Borges Coelho loads up the different characters with various meanings. Waaser is both a direct representation of foreign involvement in Mozambique as well as of a damning hubris based on a belief on technology that can be said to be as blind as that of the superstitious beliefs of the leader of the shepherds, Praado (meadow). Both men also share the delusion that they may control water by hoarding it, be it in the tanks the engineer requests from the city, be it in the secret spring Praado keeps hidden from others.²⁶ So, even though they appear to represent worlds diametrically opposite, both men also actually come to signify a common form of blindness. And although Borges Coelho might remain weary of too explicit a politicization of literature, the problems that his novels in fact address and expose are unavoidable. The extreme devastation that has been hitting Mozambique in recent years is obviously tied in to global phenomena and must be understood as such.

Although not an entirely new phenomenon in Mozambique, ‘natural’ disasters have been increasing of late in both frequency and intensity. A report from the World Bank in 2005 highlights the scale of devastation and suffering endured:

²⁴ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 49.

²⁵ ‘Acho que não é papel da literatura dar exemplos. Não creio que o escritor deva ser um professor – como dizia Chinua Achebe. O papel do escritor não é o de ser um professor, nem de ser um formador, pois este é o papel das escolas, o papel das políticas...’ [I think the role of literature is not to give examples. I do not think the writer should be a teacher – as Chinua Achebe said. The role of the writer is not that of a teacher or educator, because that is the role of schools, the role of politics...]. João Paulo Borges Coelho in conversation with Elena Brugioni: ‘A literatura e o léxico da pós-colonialidade: uma conversa com João Paulo Borges Coelho’, 430.

²⁶ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 150–151.

The World Bank notes that natural disasters, along with the social and economic impact of HIV/AIDS, are one of the main risks to the achievement of Mozambique's poverty reduction strategy. From 1965 to 1998, there were twelve major floods, nine major droughts, and four major cyclone disasters. Droughts, exacerbated by the impact of the war, have had the most devastating impacts. Four major droughts and famine between 1980 and 1992 caused an estimated 100,000 deaths.²⁷

The catastrophic results of extreme drought and flooding have further intensified in the 21st Century, with extreme disruption and loss of life caused by the floods of 2000 and 2007. At the moment of writing, the devastating effects of Tropical Cyclone Idai, which had a first landfall on 6 March 2019 and a second one on 15 March, seem to have left even previous disasters behind. From the various countries directly hit, Madagascar, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, the latter has been especially hard hit. Estimates on the number of direct casualties indicate that over a thousand people have been killed in the area of Beira and the number of those still at risk is much higher: a BBC report from 21st March stated that up to 15 thousand people were still awaiting rescue, many of them stranded on top of roofs and other structures.²⁸ Even though a number of international organisations have rushed to join the effort of trying to save as many as possible, circumstances far outstrip available resources. As one survivor, Konde Pereira, has put it, 'When the cyclone came I was in my house with my family. We survived but after that the walls and roof were gone. Then on Sunday the water started coming up from the river. Everything was taken by the water'.²⁹

One could think that by now what Rob Nixon so aptly describes as slow violence no longer would apply, given the enormity of the disaster, the news coverage it attracts, the harrowing images that go around the world. And yet, a sample of the major newspapers in Europe still indicates that the focus lies elsewhere, in the all-

²⁷ Peter Wiles, Kerry Selvester, and Lourdes Fidalgo. *Learning Lessons from Disaster Recovery: The Case of Mozambique*. 2005, 3.

²⁸ 'Cyclone Idai: "15,000 people still need to be rescued"'. *BBC News: Africa* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-47647804>> accessed 1 October 2019.

²⁹ Peter Beaumont, "'The water took everything': Buzi evacuees tell of Cyclone Idai ordeal', *The Guardian* (22 March 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/mar/22/the-water-took-everything-buzi-evacuees-tell-of-cyclone-idai-ordeal>> accessed 1 October 2019.

consuming shambles that the political games being played around the imminent split of the United Kingdom from the rest of the European Union have become, the not less absurd presidential quagmire in the United States, or simply sports or the latest juicy celebrity scandal. In *Água*, the destructiveness of the flooding waters is rendered allegorically through the figure of Hydra, the mythical water snake, but even if it is announced from the very beginning, most of the novel focuses on lack, rather than excess, of water and the two must necessarily be understood together. In a recent article on ‘neoliberal hydrofiction’ Sharae Deckard recalls Fred Pearce’s book *When Rivers Run Dry*, and especially its subtitle, that she quotes directly: ‘As climate change intensifies drought in water-poor zones and flooding in water-rich zones, capitalist cores such as the USA and industrializing states like China face water scarcity in their agricultural bread-baskets to the extent that Fred Pearce calls water “the defining crisis of the twenty-first century”’.³⁰

Deckard starts from the premise that ‘[l]ate capitalism is mired in a crisis of “cheap nature”: the loss of frontiers, in cheap labour, energy, food and resources that fuelled earlier phases of accumulation’.³¹ From this perspective, both novels by Borges Coelho can be read not just as daring aesthetic experiments that question the boundaries between History, memory and fiction on the one hand, and reality and mythical representation on the other, but also as forceful registrations of a new type of crisis that Deckard, after Minqi Li, sees as ‘an epochal crisis of the capitalist world-economy’.³² Before any suspicions of reductionist ideological readings get raised, let me hasten to add that in no way do the novels simply present such a critique. In post-conflict societies such as Mozambique, still coping with the devastating effects of civil war and the multiple forms of violence and deprivation instantiated through ideological rigidity and an insistence on a version of Soviet-style socialism that, once independence had been won, turned more and more inwards in self-justification, it would be naïve at best, or downright foolish, to claim any such direct and linear

³⁰ Decakard, ‘Water shocks: Neoliberal Hydrofiction and the crisis of “cheap water”’, 2019; Fred Pearce, *When the Rivers Run Dry*, 2006.

³¹ Deckard, ‘Water shocks: Neoliberal Hydrofiction...’, 108.

³² Deckard, ‘Water shocks: Neoliberal Hydrofiction...’, 108. Minqi Li, *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2008). On the notion of ‘registration’ in reference to World-Literature see, for instance, Neil Lazarus, ‘Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 46/1 (2011), 122: ‘We are trying to explore the suggestion that “world literature” be understood as the literature that registers and encodes the social logic of modernity.’

reading.³³ If for some a materialist reading, such as I propose here, would appear forced, then perhaps the views offered by Félix Guattari who, in *The Three Ecologies*, certainly also distances himself from a Marxist view of the global crisis he diagnoses, can be of help. Guattari writes:

Although Marx's own writings still have great value, Marxist discourse has lost its value. It is up to the protagonists of social liberation to remodel the theoretical references so as to illuminate a possible escape route out of contemporary history, which is more nightmarish than ever. It is not only species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity. A stifling cloak of silence has been thrown over the emancipatory struggles of women, and of the new proletariat: the unemployed, the 'marginalized', immigrants.³⁴

Please note that Guattari makes an all-important distinction between Marx's writings and the subsequent Marxist discourse. Also, it should be noted that the French original was published in 1989, the year that would also see the fall of the Berlin Wall, on 9 November, and with it the beginning of the collapse of left totalitarian regimes. As such, Guattari's disillusionment with the left and its failure to deliver emancipation, can be seen in its proper context. Moving forward to today, even though one could say that the failures of large sectors of the Left have only increased – and perhaps Mozambique's turn from hard-core socialism to extreme neo-liberalism can be viewed as symptomatic of such failure – I would argue that the exponential rise in inequality has brought a renewed need to return to a critique of capitalism. What cannot be ignored though, is how both novels, at their core, offer a scathing critique of inequality and the resulting suffering. In *Água* the effects of inequality are pervasive and only accentuated by the extended drought. One could say most, if not

³³ Although this is not the place to embark on a discussion of the complexities at stake, from the initial anti-imperial struggle, to the one-party state after independence, followed by an extremely prolonged civil war, and a more recent turn to rampant neo-liberal capitalism, this does not mean they can be ignored. Some useful reading, beyond now classic works of historiography, would include work by Bjørn Enge Bertelsen such as "It will rain until we are in power!" Floods, elections and memory in Mozambique', in Harri Englund and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, eds., *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004), as well as Jason Sumich's 'Politics After the Time of Hunger in Mozambique: A Critique of Neo-Patrimonial Interpretation of African Elites' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34/1 (2008), 115-125. A brief synopsis is provided by Michael G. Panzer in 'Socialist Politics in Lusophone Africa' in Thomas Spear, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* <<https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/>> accessed 14 August 2019.

³⁴ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 41–42.

all characters – with the possible exception of the foreign engineer whose position is clearly one of power, even more, reminiscent of old-style colonialist power, than new-fangled neo-colonial attitudes – experience precarity as a condition of their lives. The figure of Maara, the young woman who is central to the narrative, combines several forms of precarity: as a poor, rural worker, and as a woman and single mother. But she is by no means alone, even if in the end only she and Ryo are the only ones who, apparently, get lost and might not escape the rushing flood water. *Água* can yield many readings, some of them probably contradictory, if not mutually exclusive. But I see little to be gained from any reading that would ignore or downplay the political import of both novels, starting with their very form as allegories and their use of irrealism, which I would like to consider now.

To claim *Água* as an allegorical narrative, with its use of symbolic names for all the characters, and with its clear allusion to Greek myth in the figure of Hydra, should raise no objections. To do so for *Ponta Gea*, however, might raise some critical eyebrows; yet, as I will argue, that novel is as allegorical as *Água*, even if in different ways. Furthermore, the allegorical mode of both narratives, I want to claim, is part and parcel of their ecocritical stand. Fredric Jameson of course was right, in connecting allegory with the nation in his highly polemic essay ‘Third-World Literature in the Age of Multi-National Capitalism’: ‘Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society’.³⁵ If anything, I would contend that this applies to much of literature and is not, in any way, specific to texts produced in developing countries. At the same time though, I would like to make clear that what I understand by this is that both novels are implicated in both registering the specific societal conditions of Mozambique (or if one wants, of a part of Mozambique at least) and the profound inequality that so characterizes that (among others) nation. Even though this might seem redundant or just too obvious, I still find it must be made clear so as to

³⁵ Fredric Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Age of Multi-National Capitalism’, *Social Text* 15 (1986), 69. Much has been written, mostly in opposition, on this essay. However, even if some of its points remain arguable – for instance, the very nomenclature of ‘Third-World Literature’, as Jameson was well aware of – the link between literary form and political ideology is what matters here. For a most lucid analysis of the polemics involved see Neil Lazarus’ ‘Fredric Jameson on “Third-World Literature”: a defence’, in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 89–113.

avoid any possible confusions, especially that of pretending to see any alignment between the novels and would-be national representations. Neither novel engages in an imagining of the nation even as it does offer readers windows into what forms the community, be it the devastating conditions of the present or the links, often forgotten or suppressed with the various pasts.

Clearly, my suggestion to read *Ponta Gea* as an allegory owes much to Jameson's view, just cited, that in such texts 'the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society'. Perhaps the most obvious example of this would be the figure of Zerofor, who is feared by all as a ruthless killer, and yet is also shown to be a famished and hunted human being, desperate to regain his humanity and steal a shirt to cover himself with.³⁶ Even the 'name' given to this character (presumably from the English?), is already an indication of his allegorical status. It indicates a void, a form of nothingness, an absence that is excessively present. Such a notion of emptiness is key in both novels and I will come back to it in the conclusion. For the moment, let it suffice recalling how Zerofor runs away and hides. First by blackening his body with oil, making it both darker and slippery, and later, when covered with his own blood from all the mosquitoes, with a further mud cover – yes, a turning to nature in a literal sense. Zerofor makes himself literally and symbolically into a void before he returns, trying to steal a shirt – a sort of return to the human condition as well, and kills again. This excessive presence and absence of Zerofor has its counterpart in the excessive absence of water – the prolonged drought – and its subsequent, overwhelming, return as Hydra.

Had Zerofor been the only allegorical instance in the novel it already would be sufficient to let us understand how Borges Coelho uses it so as to have us reflect on the gap between reality and perception as well as on the fundamental inequality that pervades society and which the novel critically reflects. Indeed, one could say that Zerofor performs the embodiment of a phantasmatic logic pervasive to the whole inasmuch as he is both a projection of the fears of the Portuguese colonists and a kind of *revenant* that moves at night and comes back from the other side of the border to haunt them. But of course it is not just Zerofor who functions allegorically. The novel's narrator, whose process of growing up we are given to watch as he retraces

³⁶ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 109.

his own loss of innocence, in which the experience of freedom during vacation is soon tempered with the witnessing of death in the form of a drowned man:

Ainda inocentes, avançamos para o centro deste espaço mágico (...) É nesta altura que damos com o corpo estendido no chão de matope. (...) Vamos calados e com frio, culpados, com a sensação de termos perdido, algures no caminho, a capa protectora da nossa inocência. (...) Mais tarde, no escuro do quarto, com restos de matope nas unhas e os olhos muito abertos, dar-me-ei conta, pela primeira vez, de ter trazido comigo a aldeia, o vasto mundo, o afogado.³⁷

[Still innocent, we go forward into this magic space (...) That is when we come upon the body lying on the mud ground. (...) We walk in silence and cold, guilty, with the sensation of having lost, somewhere on the way, the protective cover of our innocence. (...) Later, in the darkness of my room, with remnants of mud in my fingernails and eyes wide open, I will realize, for the first time, that I had brought with me the village, the vast world, the drowned man.]

Witnessing death – and its inescapable and constant link with water – moves the narrator from the position of being a single individual, and a child, into that of a member of the collective, as space conflates and both village and the world have come to be in his bedroom, along with the corpse of the drowned man. At this point it might be useful to bring Michael Löwy's concept of 'critical irrealism' into play, already alluded to at the outset. In 'The Current of Critical Irrealism' Löwy sets out his concept to function along the notion of 'critical realism', which, as he notes, 'has a long tradition in Marxist and radical literary studies'.³⁸ As Löwy sees it, 'critical irrealism' would expand on that tradition, by taking into account the countless works that do not follow the strictures of realism, yet are also sharply critical of societal ills: 'If the dominant ideology of bourgeois society, from the Industrial Revolution onwards, celebrated the virtues of economic progress, of technology, mechanization, and automation, and of the unlimited expansion of industrial production and

³⁷ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 67–87.

³⁸ Löwy, 'The Current of Critical Irrealism', 193.

consumption, these artists voiced a radically dissident attitude'.³⁹ Even if one is prepared to say that the child would most probably imagine, or remember, seeing the corpse of the drowned man, imagining that the village and the whole world also had come to be in the bedroom goes a step further. The conflation effected by the narrative is crucial for the reader to understand the traumatic extent of the change effected by the sight of death, but it clearly goes beyond realist norms. This, I would suggest, is precisely the type of 'critical irrationalism' Löwy identifies. But that conflation of spaces and worlds takes many other forms throughout the novel; as such it must be understood not just as an occasional, perhaps too rhetorically charged expression, but rather as one of the key defining characteristics of the novel – indeed of both novels. Before proceeding further and so as to avoid giving the impression such a reading is but a mere caprice, let me focus on the traumatic moment when the narrator discovers the corpse, face down in the water, already surrounded by crabs:

Quanto a mim, estabeleço desde logo uma relação muito íntima com o afogado. Sei, repito, que no futuro a sua imagem me visitará os sonhos com frequência: a mesma expressão hierática e ausente atrás das pálpebras inchadas, a mesma posição que assume agora no matope, embora vogando num espaço indefinido e escuro, idêntico àquele onde se movem os Astros. Sim, um astronauta que se afasta lentamente em direcção ao largo, ao âmago da noite cósmica, mas cuja face está sempre perto de mim.⁴⁰

[As for me, I immediately establish a very intimate relationship with the drowned man. I know, I repeat, that in the future his image will frequently visit my dreams: the same hieratic and absent expression from behind the swollen eyelids, the same position he now holds in the mud, although floating in an indefinite and dark space, identical to that where the stars move. Yes, an astronaut who slowly recedes away, towards the core of cosmic night, but whose face is always near me.]

As is obvious, here too we are given a fantastical description of the deceased's body meant to stress not only its haunting nature – and it should be noted that the narrative avoids any kind of melodramatic or horrific description – and of the way in

³⁹ Löwy, 'The Current of Critical Irrationalism', 206.

⁴⁰ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 76.

which the body and the water merge at the same time that the water and the night sky merge, the same way in which the image of the drowned man will never again cease to be part of the narrator. Once again, the phantasmatic logic is at work. However, it is not predicated on embodiment; if anything at all, on its opposite: the conflation of spaces is also a negation of their specificity, the identification, unlike in the process once described by Claude Lefort to explain the encroachment of totalitarianism⁴¹, is not so much of one body with another (the single Party with the ‘united people’ as in so much state propaganda all over the world, including in Mozambique, whether during the colonial era or afterwards), but rather the joining together of various ways of becoming other, of becoming the other, of dissolving any fixed boundaries of identity, the sea flowing into the muddy pool, and turning into the night sky where the stars move.

The narrator of *Ponta Gea* also figures as an allegory. Just as the process of his growing up in itself is allegorized through and through, so the form of the *Bildungsroman* itself comes to be seen as an allegory.⁴² Reading *Ponta Gea* and *Água* as expressions of ‘critical irrealism’ or, as I would suggest, as constituted by allegorical realism, is not to ignore that they are also intensely self-reflexive and metanarrative. Nor should we see that as strange at all.⁴³ The type of allegory

⁴¹ Claude Lefort, in *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988)13, writes:

The theory - or if not the theory, the spirit of the movement [modern totalitarianism], as in Nazism – may well turn everything to account as circumstances demand, but it can never be challenged by experience. State and civil society are assumed to have merged; this is brought about through the agency of the ubiquitous party which permeates everything with the dominant ideology and hands down power's orders, as circumstances demand, and through the formation of a multiplicity of microbodies (organizations of all kinds in which an artificial socialization and relations of power conforming to the general model are reproduced). A logic of identification is set in motion, and is governed by the representation of power as embodiment.

Along these lines one should also see Ewa Ziarek's *An Ethics of Dissensus*, in which she draws on both Claude Lefort and Julia Kristeva, to analyse the way in which such a ‘phantasmatic logic of the reincorporation of power’ gets deployed to further fascism and racism (Ewa Ziarek's, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 120.

⁴² On the question of the *Bildungsroman* outside of its traditional, European and bourgeois settings, see for instance Jed Etsy's *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Tobias Boes' *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁴³ In a lucid and probing essay Derek Attridge questions the relationship between allegory and self-reflective narratives, having in mind, especially, the work of J. M. Coetzee. As he states in ‘Against Allegory’: ‘allegorical reading of the traditional kind has no place for this uncertainty and open-endedness, this sense that the failure to interpret can be as important, and quite as emotionally powerful, as success would be’. See Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 48.

deployed by Borges Coelho is far from the traditional. In *Água*, it moves the reader to understand that the events narrated and the particular individual actions are not only always part of a whole but also that they represent a collectivity even as they register reality at the individual level. In the end, readers are asked to let go of any attachment to the distinction between individual and the collectivity, not because of some forced, totalitarian, ideology, but because of the way in which the portion of the world we get to glimpse, is in itself representative of a much larger scale of events. In *Ponta Gea*, where the entire narrative is presented from a singular perspective, the allegorizing process is, if anything, even more complex. Bereft of the device of the immediately symbolic names, Maara, Ryo, Laama and all the others, indeed, even bereft of a name at all as the narrator's name is never mentioned, *Ponta Gea* relies much more on the strategy of creating scenes that, in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, their singularity, assume an allegorical function beyond their specific singularity.

The process of dissolving boundaries, repeatedly exemplified by the way in which water's very fluidity annuls set categories, is extended throughout the two novels to encompass all. Instead of setting up some rigid opposition between nature on the one hand, and humanity on the other, or between nature and some 'good' people in touch with the natural world, and others whose use of technology would threaten our world, Borges Coelho not only resists such an idealization process, but instead sets out to dissolve any set antinomies between nature and technology. A key figuration of this symbiotic process is the very sound of the ever present mobile phone that Ervio (grass) has given to Maara (sea) so the two lovers can communicate, even though he has gone to the city to work and Maara has stayed behind in the village with her one young daughter and her aged mother. The sound made by the phone is always represented as if it were emitted by a cricket. Thus, that one, apparently most technologically advanced and unnatural, means of communicating across the barriers of space (and time if we consider the disparate levels of development), is also always represented as if it were part of primordial nature. The rapid spread and use of mobile phones in Africa is an important question that raises in itself a number of issues.⁴⁴ Some are patent in *Água*, such as the gap between urban

⁴⁴ The subject of mobile telephony in Africa has been approached by an increasing number of researchers and journalists, usually from an economic perspective and with a majority of jubilant views on how Africa really is a model for global capitalism. A subtle take on the issue of the imbrications between capital and mobile telephony in the semi-periphery that takes another route is expressed by Phillip Rothwell in 'Vodafone Portugal: Postcolonial Ethics in a Mobile Age.' (2007). For a detailed

and rural conditions of life, the systemic inequality and the disproportionality of resources between men and women, even the question of how technology can be understood, in some instances, not so much as a form of development, but as a reiteration of the archaic, that is, of the realm of the supernatural. This is directly affirmed once by Laago (lake) to convince Praado (meadow) to assault Maara and steal her mobile phone: '[s]ão instrumentos demoníacos, chegaram aqui na altura em que o Engenheiro chegou. Pergunto-me se não terá sido ele que os trouxe e espalhou; pergunto-me se não terão sido eles a causa de todo este castigo que se abate sobre nós.' [They are devilish tools, they arrived here when the Engineer arrived. I wonder if it was not him who brought and distributed them; I wonder if they are not the cause of all this punishment that has come over us].⁴⁵

Although the shepherd, with his distrust of machines and change, might have been a logical candidate for expressing such superstitious beliefs, Borges Coelho carefully avoids that, since to do so would simply reinstate the type of dichotomy he is at pains to avoid. Indeed, Borges Coelho is careful not to attribute any such feelings to any of the characters in *Água*, not even to Laago, who knows fully well his insinuations are simply a perfidious attempt to exploit the shepherd's fears, including his distrust of white people, so as to better manipulate him and enlist his unwitting help in the vain attempt at controlling Maara, whom he had already previously assaulted.

One of the most innovative elements of both novels is precisely this symbiotic relationship between all forms of being, from the mythical such as the Hydra, that, however enigmatic and as if omnipotent still issues, as if she were born, forth from a

analysis of the spread of mobile telephony in Africa that provides much comparative data and, although not quite critical, goes beyond the mere celebratory, see Jenny C. Aker and Isaac M. Mbiti, 'Mobile Phones and Economic Development in Africa' (2010). Note for instance, how the authors, not unlike Borges Coelho, refuse simple dichotomies and insist on linking the individual to the collective in their analysis (207):

Mobile telephony has brought new possibilities to the continent. Across urban– rural and rich– poor divides, mobile phones connect individuals to individuals, information, markets, and services. In Mali, residents of Timbuktu can call relatives living in the capital city of Bamako – or relatives in France. In Ghana, farmers in Tamale are able to send a text message to learn corn and tomato prices in Accra, over 400 kilometers away. In Niger, day laborers are able to call acquaintances in Benin to find out about job opportunities without making the US\$40 trip. In Malawi, those affected by HIV and AIDS can receive text messages daily, reminding them to take their medicines on schedule. Citizens in countries as diverse as Kenya, Nigeria, and Mozambique are able to report violent confrontations via text message to a centralized server that is viewable, in real time, by the entire world.

⁴⁵ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 230.

woman, Heera⁴⁶, to the technical such as Ervio's *Landrover*, the mobile phone that carries human voices across space and time, or even the machines in the city that register water levels and whose print outs themselves are referred, as their letters in black ink would be furious tears in what is described as 'a loucura das máquinas' [the madness of the machines].⁴⁷ In the end, the flood annuls everything and renders even advanced technology void: 'acabaram-se de vez aquelas feitiçarias, as pequenas caixas de segredos estão vazias, nada dentro delas, nada, nada' [those witch spells were finally over, the little boxes of secrets are empty, there is nothing inside them, nothing, nothing].⁴⁸ What is remarkable about such a position that refuses any normative boundaries between different forms of being is its affirmation of life and its injunction to perceive the world as one system, rather than as a field of opposites. Borges Coelho neither idolizes tradition nor rejects modernity, insisting, rather, that we learn to see how they flow into each other, and out of each other, and how even time takes part in such an ebb and flow through the effects of memory. Likewise, I would argue, the novels register, and ask us to reflect on, the history of combined and uneven development leading up to the current catastrophic moment we are living now, be it understood in terms of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory or of Guattari's proposed 'ecosophy'.⁴⁹

In conclusion, I will just try a brief reflection of the importance of the ends of both novels. Both are like a *mise en abyme* of their respective narratives, at the same time that they constitute double, or triple, allegories: of realism or 'critical irrationalism', of the very process of telling, and of time. In the wake of the flood Ervio continues his desperate search for Maara, who, as with Ryo, has disappeared. The entire narrative had been built on dialogue, in the incessant dialogue between Ryo and Laama always intercalated with the unfolding of events, a dialectical situation itself in dialectic relation to the rest of the narrative. Yet, in the end, even dialogue has come to be seen

⁴⁶ The description of events in Chapter 127 is made to give the impression that Heera is indeed giving birth and that Maara comes to help her in the last moments. Besides the myth of Hydra, of course, there are many other legends concerning water spirits, invariably female, and it should be noted that Heera is presented as a liminal figure herself and that Maara's own name is indicative of the sea.

⁴⁷ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 307.

⁴⁸ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 355.

⁴⁹ See Immanuel Wallerstein's own brief overview of his theoretical work in *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, 2004. Besides the book on *The Three Ecologies* already mentioned, see also Guattari's programmatic essay 'Pour une refondation des pratiques sociales' in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 1992, 26–27, in which he calls directly for a change of mentality, and 'the necessity of founding an "ecosophy" that would articulate environmental ecology, social ecology, and mental ecology'.

as impossible. Ryo has disappeared, Maara will not answer Ervio's call, and Ervio 'perdeu a esperança de dialogar com a gente que aqui está' [has lost hope of dialoguing with the people there]. It is as if time has stood still ('o tempo já não corre').⁵⁰ Ervios' repeated agonizing questions, over the radio, to the search and rescue helicopter, whether Maara had been seen, does not surprise the villagers. But the cause for such a state of affairs might surprise the reader: 'E os outros já não se surpreendem: é Ervio criando histórias onde as histórias terminaram' [And the others no longer are surprised: it is Ervio creating stories where the stories have already ended].⁵¹ So, one way of understanding the conclusion would be to entertain the infinity of narrative as even though time has stopped flowing and dissolved into nothing, narrative will still go forth even after the very end of narrative.

In *Ponta Gea*, it is the entire last chapter that must be read as yet another allegory of realism, of the narrative process and of the melting or the drowning of time as the past, and specifically the image of the drowned man, returns yet again. The chapter, significantly, is titled 'Rumores Brancos' in direct reference to the iconoclastic and anticolonial first novel of Almeida Faria – published in 1962 when he was nineteen and just after the beginning of the colonial war in Angola.⁵² As if by a sleight of hand the narrator of *Ponta Gea*, who must be approximately nineteen himself, having just finished secondary school and spending one extra year with Latin lessons because of having failed that exam, was a version of Faria. And as if the chapter – with its deeply 'critical unreal' construction and presentation of reality as both haunting and absurd, and its reference to the mystery surrounding the Cargo ship *Angoche*, rumoured to have been assaulted by the armed faction of the Portuguese Communist party (ARA), and found on fire adrift on the high seas in 1971, its entire crew and one lone passenger missing – was also a sort of double of Faria's book. A book, which, in yet another abyssal, self-reflective and allegorical step, is given to the young narrator by the Latin teacher. The whole chapter revolves around two cases, that of the as yet unsolved mystery surrounding the fate of the *Angoche*, and the suspicious death, labelled suicide, of a young woman, Maria Teresa. What might seem to a casual reader simply a strange, quaint, deluded tendency to believe in conspiracies on the part of the eccentric Latin teacher, reveals itself as actually based

⁵⁰ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 372.

⁵¹ Borges Coelho, *Água*, 372.

⁵² Almeida Faria, *Rumor Branco* [White Rumor], 1962.

on reality, comprising both the factual events as well as the stories constructed around them to try to explain the unexplainable. Just as the narrator suspects his teacher might just want to ‘suspender o tempo’ [suspend time],⁵³ so too the narrator blends past, present, and future in a doubling of one allegory within yet another, calling on memory as a guarantee of the future, evoking both Walter Benjamin’s famous ‘Angel of History’ as well as Wim Wender’s *Der Himmel über Berlin* [*Wings of Desire*, 1987].⁵⁴ All becomes dark and the school empty. The narrator feels a need to ‘celebrar o exame e as coisas que se perdem para sempre’ [to celebrate the exam and the things one loses forever] before he can leave and do so ‘como o anjo novo, olhando por cima do ombro a minha cidade’ [as the new angel, looking over my shoulder at my city].⁵⁵

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⁵³ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 346.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007 [1969]), 253–264.

⁵⁵ Borges Coelho, *Ponta Gea*, 346.

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